DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 031 SP 035 298

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TITLE Teacher Empowerment: Can It Help Teaching and Learning? Final Deliverable to OERI.
INSTITUTION Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Madison, WI.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE May 94
CONTRACT R117Q00005
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Centralization; Curriculum; *Educational Policy; Junior High Schools; Mathematics Education; *Participative Decision Making; *Personal Autonomy; Professional Development; School Administration; School Policy; Science Education; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Responsibility; *Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Empowerment

ABSTRACT

This paper contrasts three distinct theoretical positions about the importance of empowerment for instruction and achievement. The "teacher professionalism" view maintains that empowerment enhances instruction and learning, the "bureaucratic centralization" approach argues that empowerment impedes effective teaching and learning, and the "loose coupling" perspective suggests that empowerment is largely irrelevant for what happens in classrooms. A limited test of these competing views was conducted using data from the Longitudinal Study of American youth, a national study of math and science teaching and learning in seventh and eighth grades. The study asked teachers whether they had control over classroom curricular content and teaching methods, and whether they participated in administrative decisions and in setting school policies. Results indicated that: (1) in eighth-grade math and seventh-grade science, control over curriculum content had a negative effect on achievement, whereas control over teaching methods was positively related to achievement; (2) none of the empowerment variables made a difference for achievement in seventh-grade math and eighth-grade science; and (3) the impact of empowerment did not seem to depend on teacher experience, administrative leadership, or reported levels of teacher morale and collaboration. The study concludes that ambiguities underlie calls for teacher empowerment as part of educational reform packages. (Contains 17 references.) (JDD)

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TEACHER EMPOWERMENT: CAN IT HELP TEACHING AND LEARNING?

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May 1994

This article is based on "Teacher Empowerment: A Policy in Search of Theory and Evidence," by Adam Gamoran, Andrew C. Porter, and Tae-joong Gahng, which will be published in W. J. Fowler, B. Levin, and H. J. Walberg (Eds.), Organizational Influences on Educational Productivity (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press). Support for this research was provided by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS), Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, which is supported by a grant from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Grant No. OERI-R117-Q00005). Any opinions, findings, or conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting agencies.

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TEACHER EMPOWERMENT: CAN IT HELP TEACHING AND LEARNING?

Teacher empowerment is a key element in prominent educational reforms. Under headings such as professionalism, autonomy, decision-making, or democratization, recent initiatives commonly call for increasing teachers' opportunities to participate in determining school goals and policies and/or to exercise judgments about curriculum content and instructional methods in their classrooms (e.g., Maeroff, 1988; McNeil, 1989; Shanker, 1989; Johnson, 1990; Sykes, 1990; Zeichner, 1991; Glickman, 1993).

Is empowerment an end in itself, or a means to an end? Many advocates speak of empowerment as if it is a means to improving teaching and learning, but does this occur? What, precisely, are the mechanisms through which empowerment may affect teaching and learning? We contrast three distinct theoretical positions about the importance of empowerment for instruction and achievement. Then, we report on a limited test of these competing views.

Three Views of Empowerment

Whereas the "teacher professionalism" view maintains that empowerment enhances instruction and learning, the "bureaucratic centralization" approach argues that empowerment impedes effective teaching and learning. In contrast to both, the "loose coupling" perspective suggests that empowerment is largely irrelevant for what happens in classrooms.

The Teacher Professionalism View

Proponents of empowerment argue that teachers are in the best position to assess the needs of their students (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1988). The first assumption of this view is

that most teachers are well-trained, experienced, and dedicated professionals. They possess essential knowledge about curriculum and instruction. Given the opportunity, they will develop their own strategies for bringing about success in their classrooms.

The second assumption is that teaching and learning are processes involving substantial give-and-take between teachers and students. The professionalism perspective conceives of instruction as the joint product of teachers' and students' actions. Effective instruction requires attending to students' responses, which may differ from place to place and time to time. Only when teachers have sufficient autonomy to depart from a pre-ordained plan, can they help students to maximize their learning.

The Bureaucratic Centralization View

In its strongest form, the bureaucratic centralization view is skeptical about the training, skills, and goals of teachers. It aims to ensure that teachers follow a pre-specified plan that has demonstrated effectiveness for externally-defined goals (e.g., Callahan, 1962; Gentile, 1988). Increasing teachers' opportunities for decision-making, particularly about classroom matters, creates the danger that teachers will choose subjects and/or methods that are not appropriate or productive for student achievement. Hence, this view maintains that more empowerment results in less effective teaching and lower achievement.

A softer version of this perspective suggests that there are some areas in which outside experts are better informed than teachers, and that decisions in these areas -- but not in all aspects of teaching -- should be made by administrators or others outside the teaching ranks. For example, some writers argue that whereas teachers know best about what

methods work for them, they should not have as much latitude about what content to teach (see Porter, Archbald, and Tyree, 1990).

Another version of the bureaucratic centralization approach accepts the value of teacher participation in collective decision-making as a way of increasing teacher commitment and effort, but demands conformity at the classroom level once collective decisions are reached (Porter, 1989). For example, this view might support teacher participation in curriculum design, but require all teachers to follow the curriculum once it is set.

The Loose Coupling Perspective

Many writers have rejected the notion that schools are bureaucracies operating through rules, directives, supervision, and other usual trappings of authority (e.g., Weick, 1976; Meyer and Rowan, 1978; Tyler, 1985; Gamoran and Dreeben, 1986). Because of conflicting goals and an uncertain technology (i.e. the relation between teaching and learning is not well understood), schools tend to seal off classrooms from outside inspection. Strict control is maintained over certain ritual aspects of schools, such as which students and teachers are assigned to each class. But what happens after assignment to classes occurs is not controlled.

This view claims that schools are "loosely coupled," meaning that decisions occurring in one part of the school do not reverberate in clearly patterned ways elsewhere in the school. Thus, changes in teacher participation in school-level decisions would have little impact on classroom practice. Further, teachers already have a high degree of autonomy

about what occurs in their classrooms, so increased empowerment at the classroom level would be irrelevant to teaching and learning.

Some Contingencies

None of the three views says much about conditions under which the predicted effects (or lack of effects) of empowerment are more or less likely to occur. Yet the validity of each is likely to depend, at least in part, on the surrounding circumstances and on the extent to which the underlying assumptions hold at a given time and place.

Assumptions in the professionalism view about the characteristics of teachers could be modified by acknowledging that teachers vary in their professionalism; hence, those with more expertise, dedication, and skill would be more likely to improve their instruction and raise student achievement when they are given free rein to make decisions. Instead of assuming that teachers are professionals and advocating autonomy on that basis, one can suggest that the impact of empowerment may depend on the presence of resources available to the teacher. These resources may be individual -- such as experience, subject matter expertise, and teaching skill -- or collective, such as collegial relations with fellow teachers and opportunities for staff collaboration. The greater the teacher's access to such resources, the higher the payoff from empowerment.

These contingencies can be reconciled with the bureaucratic centralization and loose coupling views. Both views would accept the claim that more skilled or well-supported teachers would make better use of autonomy.

Evidence about the Effects of Empowerment

Past research on schools provides little evidence to support or disprove the claims of any of the three views. Although a number of studies have examined the connections between external controls and classroom practices (e.g., McNeil, 1986; Archbald and Porter 1994), none have traced the impact of empowerment through teaching to student learning.

We addressed this issue with data from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY), a national study of math and science teaching and learning. LSAY followed students from seventh to eighth grade, and obtained student test scores and questionnaires from students and teachers (Gamoran, Porter, and Gahng, in press.) We measured empowerment by asking teachers whether they had control over classroom curricular content and over classroom teaching methods, and whether they participated in administrative decisions and setting school policies.

Overall, our results for empowerment in two grade levels (seventh and eighth) and subjects (math and science) were weak. The only discernable pattern was that in both eighth-grade math and seventh-grade science, control over curriculum content had a negative effect on achievement, whereas control over teaching methods was positively related to achievement. This pattern was predicted by the modified version of the centralization view. However, it did not hold for seventh-grade math or eighth-grade science, where none of the empowerment variables made a difference for achievement.

We found no evidence that empowerment affected achievement by encouraging teachers to change their instructional practices. Moreover, the impact of empowerment did

not seem to depend on teacher experience, administrative leadership, or reported levels of teacher morale and collaboration.

Conclusions

Our research on empowerment was exploratory, and inconsistencies in the survey results prevent us from reaching firm conclusions. Our main contribution, we hope, is to point out the ambiguities that underlie current calls for teacher empowerment as part of educational reform packages. Empowerment is clearly no magic bullet, and neither theory nor past research gives reason for unequivocal support for the idea. Empowerment may improve teaching and learning, but the conditions under which this may occur have not been established. There are other outcomes besides student achievement, however, for which teacher empowerment may be a useful lever (e.g., quality of school life for teachers).

In enhancing teachers' control and influence, more specific attention must be given to the areas in which teachers are to be empowered, and to the goals that empowerment strategies are supposed to address.

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